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# Inquiry, Viewpoint Pluralism, and Student Engagement Research Brief

Kelly Siegel-Stechler, Senior Researcher, CIRCLE, Tufts University

**The EAD Research and Evaluation Task Force is pleased to share these research briefs which summarize findings from research on various practices and priorities associated with EAD. The authors of each brief were asked to highlight main findings from research on the given subject. Additional briefs are in process and will be released periodically**

The Educating for American Democracy (EAD) Pedagogy Companion's Principle 4 promotes "Inquiry as the Primary Mode of Learning." Inquiry based instruction is a pedagogical method that aims to avoid prescriptive approaches to learning by centering instruction around a compelling question about which students draw their own conclusions using a variety of evidence.[1] Thus, high quality inquiry requires an open classroom climate through which to consider multiple perspectives. This brief will focus on inquiry characterized by an open classroom climate and viewpoint pluralism as a means of fostering informed student engagement with civic and political issues.

## *Why inquiry, viewpoint pluralism, and student engagement?*

Inquiry models of instruction have been found to lead to greater engagement as reflected in more complex and nuanced exploration of difficult topics.[2] When students learn by questioning and looking for information, it both increases student interest and makes space for creativity and deepening analysis.[3]

History and the social sciences are comprised of many different perspectives and points of view. Social studies thus offers a prime opportunity to help students develop the skills necessary to understand, analyze and evaluate diverse evidence from multiple viewpoints.[4] Discussion has long been used as a key tool in social studies instruction for helping students grapple with these diverse perspectives, think through complex issues, and practice rational decision

[1] Grant, Lee, and Swan, "IDM: The Inquiry Design Model."
[2] Bain, "'They Thought the World Was Flat?' Applying the Principles of How Students Learn in Teaching High School History"; Davis, "How I Learned to Stop Worrying about the Test and Love Teaching Students to Write Well"; De La Paz, "Effects of Historical Reasoning Instruction and Writing Strategy Mastery in Culturally and Academically Diverse Middle School Classrooms"; Foels, "Big Expectations: Big Ideas in Honors and Inclusion Classes"; Gradwell, "Teaching in Spite of, Rather than Because of, the Test: A Case of Ambitious History Teaching in New York State"; Lucey, Shifflet, and Weilbacher, "Patterns of Early Childhood, Elementary, and Middle-Level Social Studies Teaching: An Interpretation of Illinois Social Studies Teachers' Practices and Beliefs"; Smith and Niemi, "Learning History in School: The Impact of Course Work and Instructional Practices on Achievement"; Swan, Hofer, and Swan, "Examining Authentic Intellectual Work with a Social Studies Digital Documentary Inquiry Project in a Mandated State-Testing Environment"; Thacker and Friedman, "Three Social Studies Teachers' Design and Use of Inquiry Modules."
[3] Pellegrino and Kilday, "Hidden in Plain Sight"; Rone, "Culture from the Outside in and the Inside out: Experiential Education and the Continuum of Theory, Practice, and Policy."
[4] Barton and Levstik, "'Back When God Was Around and Everything'"; Burstein and Hutton, "Planning and Teaching with Multiple Perspectives"; Doppen, "Teaching and Learning Multiple Perspectives"; Educating for American Democracy (EAD), ""Educating for American Democracy: Excellence in History and Civics for All Learners"; National Council for the Social Studies, "The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards"; Parker, *Educating the Democratic Mind*.

making.[5] In addition, discussion is typically associated with student engagement and "student talk" in the classroom.[6] Many of these same characteristics that are central to the concept of discussion, including the presence of multiple perspectives and the ability to be reflective about one's own opinions and make up one's own mind, are also components of an open classroom climate, or an environment in which these conversations readily take place. Discussion, deliberation, and multiple perspectives are an important component of EAD Principle 4.

Those doing foundational research on discussion found that, beyond the content of courses, the presence of an open classroom climate for discussion (OCC), or "the extent to which students experience their classrooms as places to investigate issues and explore their opinions and those of their peers,"[7] was an important component of positive political socialization, building civic knowledge, and citizenship development.[8] As the concept of an open climate was developed and refined, the consistent value of students' perceiving their classrooms as places to engage with difference and controversy became increasingly apparent.[9]

Discussion in an open classroom climate where students are able to engage meaningfully with multiple perspectives has consistently been shown to be one of the strongest predictors of positive civic outcomes such as civic knowledge, political efficacy, student attitudes towards democracy and the rights of others, and intention to vote.[10] It also has important implications for students' broader academic development, including skills engagement, public speaking, critical thinking, and knowledge of current events.[11] Crucially, incorporating current and controversial issues in the classroom is associated with overall higher levels of informed engagement with civic and political issues.

## *Challenges*

However, despite the strong evidence in support of open discussion of multiple perspectives, such opportunities within classrooms remain relatively rare, especially for students from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds[12] suggest that one reason we see so few open classrooms available to students of color and those from low-income families may be because "low expectations combined with a desire for order and control lead educators to provide working class and poor students fewer opportunities to examine social

[5] Bohan and Feinberg, "The Authors of the Harvard Social Studies Project: A Retrospective Analysis of Donald Oliver, Fred Neumann, and James Shaver"; Larson and Parker, "What Is Classroom Discussion?"; Lo, *Making Classroom Discussions Work: Methods for Quality Dialogue in the Social Studies*; Parker and Hess, "Teaching with and for Discussion."
[6] Del Favero et al., "Classroom Discussion and Individual Problem-Solving in the Teaching of History"; Kawashima-Ginsberg, "Do Discussion, Debate, and Simulations Boost NAEP Civics Performance?"; Walsh and Sattes, *Questioning for Classroom Discussion*.
[7] Torney-Purta et al., "Citizenship and Education in Twenty-Eight Countries," 137.
[8] Ehman, "An Analysis of the Relationships of Selected Educational Variables with the Political Socialization of High School Students"; Ehman, "Normative Discourse and Attitude Change in the Social Studies Classroom"; Ehman, "Change in High School Students' Political Attitudes as a Function of Social Studies Classroom Climate"; Ho et al., "Teaching and Learning about Controversial Issues and Topics in the Social Studies: A Review of the Research."; Langton and Jennings, "Political Socialization and the High School Civics Curriculum in the United States"; Torney, Oppenheim, and Farnen, *Civic Education in Ten Countries. An Empirical Study*.
[9] Bickmore, "Learning Inclusion/Inclusion in Learning"; Blankenship, "Classroom Climate, Global Knowledge, Global Attitudes, Political Attitudes"; Hahn, *Becoming Political: Comparative Perspectives on Citizenship Education*; Hahn and Tocci, "Classroom Climate and Controversial Issues Discussions"; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, "Civics Is Not Enough"; Zevin, "Future Citizens: Children and Politics."
[10] Alivernini and Manganelli, "Is There a Relationship between Openness in Classroom Discussion and Students' Knowledge in Civic and Citizenship Education?"; Campbell, "Sticking Together: Classroom Diversity and Civic Education"; Campbell, "Voice in the Classroom"; Edwards, "Social Movement Oriented Citizenship in Colombia"; Godfrey and Grayman, "Teaching Citizens"; Knowles and McCafferty-Wright, "Connecting an Open Classroom Climate to Social Movement Citizenship"; Maiello, Oser, and Biedermann, "Civic Knowledge, Civic Skills and Civic Engagement"; Torney-Purta and Barber, "Democratic School Engagement and Civic Participation among European Adolescents"; Torney-Purta, Hahn, and Amadeo, "Principles of Subject-Specific Instruction in Education for Citizenship"; Torney-Purta et al., "Citizenship and Education in Twenty-Eight Countries"; Torney-Purta, Wilkenfeld, and Barber, "How Adolescents in 27 Countries Understand, Support, and Practice Human Rights"; Treviño et al., "Influence of Teachers and Schools on Students' Civic Outcomes in Latin America"; Zhang, Torney-Purta, and Barber, "Students' Conceptual Knowledge and Process Skills in Civic Education."
[11] Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion*.
[12] "Developing Citizens for Democracy?"

issues or to engage in higher order thinking than more privileged students receive."[13] There are also structural issues that could contribute to these inequities, including school policies and professional constraints upon teachers that may foster environments in which teachers are tacitly discouraged from pursuing open classroom environments, such as "curriculum as content coverage, aims as tested outcomes, teaching as management and control" and social norms that act as barriers to open classrooms, including privileging individual achievement over the group, and favoring "authority and policy instead of community and inquiry as sources of knowledge."[14] Other scholars have suggested a mis-match between students' cultural norms at home and the kinds of engagement that are rewarded at school, and the existing social hierarchies that exist within classrooms, as additional barriers to equitable engagement in these settings.[15]

Shifting away from non-dialogical practices and instead promoting classroom environments in which students have agency and which reflect democratic norms can help make space for discussion and student engagement. Such practices are also in line with the EAD Principle 5, "Practice of Constitutional Democracy and Student Agency."

The very real constraints schools and teachers face because of local political climates should also not be overlooked. Increasingly, teachers are faced with pushback from parents, school boards, and other community members who see schools and social studies classrooms as a key battleground in ongoing culture wars, and policy initiatives across the country mean that teachers are under increasing scrutiny about what content they teach and how they teach it.[16] This can leave teachers feeling unsure about how to address current events and societal controversies when they arrive, and may make them hesitant to engage students in diverse viewpoint exploration.[17] Overall, this may further reduce opportunities for meaningful discussion and engagement that were already too rare.[18]

### *Shifting Practice*

Before teachers can begin to address these barriers and inequities within their own classrooms, they first need to believe they are part of a school culture that values and supports viewpoint diversity.[19] School administrators have a crucial role to play in promoting a positive school climate and communicating clearly with parents about the value of discussion and multiple perspectives in the classroom, supporting teachers when questions arise, and working to build a school-wide culture of student voice, agency, and democratic decision making can help support can go a long way toward ensuring high quality civic learning and, ultimately, positive civic outcomes for students, are

[13] Kahne et al., 333.
[14] Dillon, *Using Discussion in Classrooms*, 107.
[15] Hadjioannou, "Bringing the Background to the Foreground"; Hemmings, "High School Democratic Dialogues"; Kelly, "Race, Social Class, and Student Engagement in Middle School English Classrooms"; Uekawa, Borman, and Lee, "Student Engagement in U.S. Urban High School Mathematics and Science Classrooms."
[16] Rogers et al., "Teaching and Learning in the Age of Trump: Increasing Stress and Hostility in America's High Schools"; Siegel-Stechler and Callahan, "Sensible or Stifled"; Swalwell and Schweber, "Teaching Through Turmoil."
[17] Cassar, Oosterheert, and Meijer, "Why Teachers Address Unplanned Controversial Issues in the Classroom"; Geller, "Teacher Political Disclosure in Contentious Times"; Journell, "Ideological Homogeneity, School Leadership, and Political Intolerance in Secondary Education: A Study of Three High Schools during the 2008 Presidential Election"; Pace, "Contained Risk-Taking."
[18] Siegel-Stechler and Kawashima-Ginsberg, "An Evaluation of Illinois Middle School Civics Implementation Progress."
[19] Educating for American Democracy (EAD), "Pedagogy Companion to the Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy."

possible.[20] To create environments in which these discussions can take place requires a focus on EAD Principle 3, "Building an EAD-Ready Classroom and School." One example of a model for this kind of school-wide approach is the Illinois Democracy School Network, a group of schools making cross-disciplinary commitment to civic learning based on a broad range of evidence-based strategies and working toward continuous improvement both within and across classrooms.[21]

Teachers can and should be intentional about how they incorporate discussion into their classrooms and ensuring they make space for multiple perspectives and the exploration of diverse viewpoints. An inquiry-based approach to teaching social studies (Principle 4), where students ask a compelling question and engage with a variety of evidence and resources to seek their own answers, is an especially effective method for engaging students in viewpoint diversity.[22] A growing number of curricula and resources can support teachers in implementing inquiries in their teaching, ranging from major district- and state-wide initiatives such as the BMore Me curriculum in Baltimore City, or the Investigating History curriculum from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, to individual units or even lesson plans from groups such as Facing History and the Stanford History Education Group.[23]



[20] Journell, "Classroom Controversy in the Midst of Political Polarization: The Essential Role of School Administrators."
[21] "Democracy Schools."
[22] Educating for American Democracy (EAD), "Pedagogy Companion to the Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy"; National Council for the Social Studies, "The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards."
[23] "Bmore Me"; "History Lessons"; "Investigating History"; "Our Pedagogy."